

MAR 3 1964

The Washington Post

Options in Viet-Nam

Appointment of William P. Bundy to the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs puts another well informed and able man in charge of our relations with a part of the world that is filled with problems.

Foremost among these problems, at the moment, is the problem of South Viet-Nam. Secretary Bundy will find, as did his predecessor, Secretary Hillsman, that this crisis will continue to clamor for attention. The appointment of a specialist for the country may help, but it is hardly likely to totally relieve the regional chief in the Department of the first-ranking headache of this part of the world.

This appointment, together with the new report of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, provides the appropriate occasion for a re-examination of United States policy. It is to be hoped that this re-study will be undertaken with an eye solely to the things we ought to do. The Administration cannot escape its responsibility by dismissing difficult courses of action, because they would be unpopular. It is in the fortunate political position of having all the assurance that a democratic government could have that the country will support whatever policy the Administration says is necessary. The people will back up any course, however unpalatable, if they are persuaded by their leadership that difficult decisions must be made in the national interest.

If anything is clear about South Viet-Nam, it is clear that any policy available to the United States will be unpalatable. In a popularity contest there is not much to recommend any of our options. To carry the war to North Viet-Nam, by air or other operations, would risk escalation into world conflict and hazard reconciliation between the Soviet Union and China. To undertake a massive reinforcement of American forces might transform a disagreeable small war into another Korea. To neutralize South Viet-Nam alone would be to endanger all of Southeast Asia. To obtain the neutralization of all Southeast Asia (while operating from a position of weakness) seems diplomatically impossible.

The option that still looks the least dangerous is the one we have tried to pick up all along: the support of the government of South Viet-Nam until Viet Cong operations are contained and diminished. There was, at one time a near-consensus among Americans on how this should be done. The need in the theater was for centralized direction of American efforts; for an intensive military opera-

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hamlet strategy

strong positions virtually invulnerable; for guerrilla operations against the Viet Cong based on the use of small and mobile forces. This prescribed strategy has not been fully applied. Direction has remained divided. The Mekong delta has not been made the primary objective. The strategic hamlet program has been distorted beyond recognition. The anti-Viet Cong operations often have looked more like the offspring of the Staff and Command School at Leavenworth than the progeny of Fort Bragg, where irregular combat tactics are taught.

What is most unpalatable about this strategy is the time element. It is a strategy that is open-ended. No one can say that it will succeed in two years, five years, 10 years or 15 years. It may take longer than that. If it is to have a chance of succeeding, the Administration must have the courage to say just this, the fortitude to admit that the time that will be required cannot be calculated, the resolution to announce that however long it takes, this country is prepared to stay the job through to the finish.

It is inconsistent with the whole concept of such a strategy for the Secretary of Defense to say, as he said last October that "the major part of the United States military task can be completed by the end of 1965." It is unwise even to voice the "hope" that this can be done, as he did in his testimony before the House Armed Services Committee last January.

To those who ask how long we must stay in South Viet-Nam the only honest answer must be that we will stay as long as it is necessary to preserve the independence of the country (just as we are prepared to stay in Europe as long as necessary.) When it becomes clear that this is what we intend, it is conceivable that a better alternative may mature. There is no reason why an alternative acceptable to us should develop as long as we exhibit an impatience to wait for it. It will not emerge from a posture of weakness and irresolution. Those who contemplate aggression against South Viet-Nam are not going to confer neutrality or independence upon it or its neighbors while the United States is poised for departure.

It is to be hoped that when the Administration has completed its new study of this crisis, it will say firmly and explain clearly what it intends to do. When it does, it will have the support of a mature public that is prepared for disagreeable tasks once it is made plain that they are required by the interests of this Nation and of the free world.

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